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ABSTRACT

The community college's policy of open admissions and low tuition offers a chance for the achievement of cultural, social, educational, and/or vocational objectives by adult students and those who, for any number of reasons, are not aware of or eligible for financial support in the form of grants, loans, and scholarships. An historical review quickly reveals that the free school movement, even at the primary and secondary levels, has been a long, arduous struggle. Equally difficult is the effort to maintain low tuition in contemporary community colleges, particularly in light of rising operational costs and rising taxes. Yet interviews with students illustrate the difficulties or impossibilities of college attendance for many as a consequence of high student costs. The raising of tuition fees threatens the second chance that our community colleges have represented. (JDS)

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Tuition Fees and Pauper Schools

(A Speech to the Pacific Coast Regional Seminar, Association of Community College Trustees, March 15, 1975, Princess Kaiulani Hotel.)

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Aloha.

I prefer the Hawaiian greeting to the more conventional speakers' salutations, because "aloha" suggests a feeling of concern for those whom the speaker is addressing. This morning I sense your dilemma as you face the problem of providing educational opportunity for all who can profit by it in a time of rising costs and already high taxes--and as a tax-payer whose income is dependent on taxes, let me assure you I experience something of the same dilemma!

As you near the end of a tightly programmed conference, I know you are all feeling it is time for an entertaining speech, one that requires little intellectual strain, and I'd like to present an amusing talk made up of jokes and clever anecdotes. But, unfortunately, tuition fees are no laughing matter, either for the student who pays them or for the trustees who must find revenues to operate their colleges.

I am a historian by trade, and I tend to look at most problems in a historical context. My first reaction when I was asked to participate on this panel was to look at the community colleges in their relationship to the rest of schooling in America. What historical needs gave rise to their development? How have they been related to the other educational institutions? What analogies can I see between the history of community colleges and other parts of our total educational system? What have been those long-range commitments made by Americans to the ideal of universal education? What have been some of the educational advances we look back on as real victories

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for the extension of our democratic values?

Free public education was not a birthright for our nation. It is an ideal whose as yet only partial realization has come through continuous and sometimes bitter struggle.

Through much of our history, even elementary schooling was offered only on payment of fees. Parents were assessed for the number of children they had in school and for the number of days each child attended. This form of tuition payments, known as the rate bill, died slowly. I had an old friend who used to tell me about his schooling in Georgia in the 1880's and how he remembers his schoolmates staying home before the end of the school year because their parents no longer had the few pennies a month needed to pay the rate bill. True, almost all states had laws which required schools to accept pauper children without payment of the rate, but most people were too proud to go to the teacher or the school board and declare themselves paupers.

In the second quarter of the 19th century, the "common man" - the landless factory worker of the North and East and the independent farmer of the old Northwest - gained political power. He not only elected all the presidents from Andy Jackson to Abe Lincoln, but he got his champions in the various state houses and legislatures. Except in the South, the working man during this period sought and won two great goals - universal manhood suffrage and free elementary schools for their children. Neither of these victories came easily. Just as it took the armed rebellion led by Thomas Dorr in 1842 to force Rhode Island to grant the right to vote to all adult men, so it required much effort to realize the goal of free elementary schooling. Even such an honored political leader as Thomas Jefferson was twice rebuffed by the Virginia legislature (in 1779 and again in 1817) when

he sought passage of a bill which would have established three years of free schooling for the white children of Virginia. In 1817, the Virginia legislators added insult to defeat by enacting a pauper school law, confirming the very invidious social class distinction Jefferson was trying to eliminate.

One mile-stone, trend-setting victory was in Pennsylvania in 1834, when legislator Thaddeus Stevens capped a long career of championing education by fighting off efforts to repeal a new law which permitted school districts in Pennsylvania to tax themselves for the support of free schools. His speech on the floor of the legislature was widely quoted by the adherents of the cause to banish the shameful pauper school concept. After arguing that public schools would be far less costly to society than private ones, he attacked the undemocratic provisions of pauper education.

> The amendment which is now proposed as a substitute for the school law of last session, is, in my opinion, of a most hateful and degrading character. It is a reenactment of the pauper law of 1809. It proposes that the assessors shall take a census, and make a record of the poor. This shall be revised, and a new record made by the county commissioners, so that the names of those who have the misfortune to be poor men's children shall be forever preserved, as a distinct class in the archives of the country! The teacher, too, is to keep in his school a pauper book, and register the names and attendance of poor scholars; thus pointing out and recording their poverty in the midst of their companions. Sir, hereditary distinctions of rank are sufficiently odious; but that which is founded on poverty is infinitely more so. Such a law should be entitled "An act for branding and marking the poor, so that they may be known

from the rich and proud." Many complain of this tax, not so much on account of its amount, as because it is for the benefit of others and not themselves. This is a mistake; it is for their own benefit, inasmuch as it perpetuates the Government and insures the due administration of the laws under which they live, and by which their lives and property are protected. . . .

This law is often objected to, because its benefits are shared by the children of the profligate spendthrift equally with those of the most industrious and economical habits. It ought to be remembered that the benefit is bestowed, not upon the erring parents, but the innocent children. Carry out this objection and you punish children for the crimes or misfortunes of their parents. You virtually establish castes and grades founded on no merit of the particular generation, but on the demerits of their ancestors; an aristocracy of the most odious and insolent kind - the aristocracy of wealth and pride. (from Thomas E. Finegan, Free Schools: A Documentary History of the Free School Movement in New York State, 1921, pp. 59-61)

Stevens carried the fight beyond the legislative halls, arguing the cause of free schooling wherever he could. His favorite toast was: "Education - May the film be removed from the eyes of Pennsylvania and she learn to dread ignorance more than taxation."

Until after the Civil War, most secondary schooling in the United States was offered by the privately-owned academies. Although many were non-profit institutions, most were not intended to be, and their propreitors fought bitterly against the extension of free schooling upward to secondary schools. Among the arguments was that "a primary education is sufficient" to

"educate . . . citizens just so far as will enable them to understand their duties and exercise their rights." To which James Smart, State Superintendent of schools in Indiana, replied in 1876, "A primary education, a mere ability to read and to write one's name, is not sufficient to qualify one to exercise this high function" of citizenship.

Another argument against the tax-supported high school was that it was attended by only a few and since the "majority derive no benefit from it, it is unjust to level a general tax for its support." To that Smart countered by saying, "The high school is an advanced elementary school. It is an integral part of the common school system."

A third argument, which, like many of those heard today about mass higher education, sounds very familiar, was that "Instead of educating the masses of children so as to prepare them for the pursuits and industries upon which they must depend for a living, high schools educate them in such a way as to make them discontent with their condition." Against this elitist argument, H.F. Harrington, New Bedford school superintendent in 1873, echoed Thaddeus Stevens' "common man" plea:

> "High schools are important as a branch of the public school system, because they constitute the only trustworthy agency to perform the essential service of bringing worthy representatives of the lower classes into the councils of the state and the organism of society. Abolish high schools, and at once you draw a broad line of separation between the rich and the poor. You limit the higher education to the children of the well to do, for only the well to do would have the means to pay for it." (Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Education for 1877, pp. LXXXI-LXXXV.)

Incidentally, the major precedent-setting court decision which clearly established the state's responsibility to tax for the support of high schools argued in part that Kalamazoo school authorities had the right to levy taxes for free high schools because high schools were the "connecting link between the ordinary common school and the state university," both of which were state-supported and free in Michigan. Justice Thomas M. Cooley, of the Supreme Court of Michigan, held in 1874 that the absence of free high schools would be a discrimination in favor of the wealthy, for they could afford private secondary schooling to prepare their sons for study at the university.

Sixty years after the Kalamazoo decision, secondary education was still highly selective. In 1930, a report prepared by Dr. Charles Prosser for the Governor's Advisory Committee on Education recommended that high schools in Hawaii admit no more students than they admitted in 1930, eliminating at least 20% of the ninth graders from further public schooling. The arguments for this limitation were that the Territory could not afford to pay for education for everyone who wanted to go to high school and that high school education, particularly in the rural parts of the Territory, was making young people have ambitions which made them dissatisfied with jobs on the plantations and in the canneries. In 1933, the Legislature, under pressure of the conservative big business domination, passed legislation levying tuition for high school, and although the fees were only $10 a year, plantation workers were earning a dollar a day. Parental objection led to the repeal of the tuition law in 1937. So we do not have to go far back in our history to find analogies similar to the situation we now face.

Mass education at the college level became a reality after World War II under the impact of the G.I. Bill. Studies of the cost-benefits of the free college education of the veteran (which included subsidies for his living

expenses as well as his tuition, fees, and books) have shown that in terms of increased taxes paid because of higher earning power, due in turn to additional education, the G.I. Bills have already proved shrewd investments for both state and federal governments. And these figures do not take into account the tremendous social contributions produced by those educated veterans.

As our society has become more complex and more dependent on technology, it is no longer sufficient that our "common" education be stopped at the elementary or even the high school level. There is a clear social need for schooling beyond the 12th grade for as many of our citizens as can profit by it. Limiting the opportunity for post-secondary education to those who can pay for it or to those who are willing to undergo the humiliation of applying for scholarships will cut off a large portion of our potential talent from achieving its maximum development - a tragic result for both the society and the undeveloped individuals. We could be denying ourselves the services of professionals and technologists who might solve some of our perplexing problems or of public servants who could more effectively meet frustrating social crises had they been better trained. As your draft of a code of ethics for trustees states, "Our country can advance only in relationship to the education of its people and their ability to solve the problems of society."

The most commonly suggested compromise to increased tuition fees is to increase the number and amount of scholarships and loans. For those persons so low on the economic scale that they are habituated to public scrutiny of their financial affairs, this may be a partial solution. However, many of that class see only the cost and do not realize they could get help - or if they did dream of asking for help, they don't know how to proceed successfully. As a result, many of that economic class never seriously consider college as

an option open to them. Occasionally later in life they get a desire for enough education to get out of their rut, but then they often have family responsibilities, car payments, heavily committed charge accounts, and perhaps mortgage payments. They cannot add to their burden with more loans, nor are they eager to reveal their financial straits to outsiders to demonstrate their need for scholarships or grants.

This is even more true of the middle-class person, justly proud of what he thinks is his financial independence. How would you feel about putting down on paper the kind of information called for on this standard financial aid application? The taxable income of each member of your family and its sources; the non-taxable income, including social security and welfare benefits; your U.S. and state income taxes; your outstanding debts; your cash, savings, and checking accounts; the annual rent or mortgage payments on your family residence; the face value of your insurance policies; your total car indebtedness; your marital status. If you own a farm or business, there are supplemental forms asking for your gross and net income, assets, indebtedness, taxes, net profit or loss and your share of the net profit.

To say the answers are confidential, boggles the mind, for the moment the applicant tells the computer his affairs, he has lost his privacy to anyone who has access to the forms or to the computer. For many, that invasion of privacy and the consequent threat to self-respect is greater than the loss of opportunity for further education.

A recent Chronicle of Higher Education article (February 3, 1975) carries some interviews with Chicago high school seniors, and their comments reveal the plight of the middle class college applicant.

Betsy is one of three children. Her father earns about $7,000 a year as a car salesman. She ranks eighth in her high school class.

"There's not much money to offer me at home. My mother is sick. I won't deal with no loans, because I don't know what's going to happen in the future. And when I get out of school and start making money, I want to put it in my pocket and not start paying off bills."

Mary's father, with overtime, earns about $18,000 a year. "I was going to go to Northern Illinois, and my major was going to be nursing, but I received my state scholarship application back, and they said I wasn't eligible for any aid. I don't think it's fair. Father is 60 years old, and if he sends me to college with his own money, what will he have for his retirement? I guess my last resort would be either to get a loan, or just go to a nursing school. The cost for the three years there is about equal to one year at a four-year college. My parents could afford the three-year school, but they want me to go to college. It's important to them, and it's important to me, but with all these things just holding me back, I have no other alternative. I have to take it or leave it, or work in a factory the rest of my life. I'm backed into a corner."

Shirley's parents earn about $20,000 a year and have three children, one of whom is already in college. She ranks third in her high school class. "I'M planning to go to college and then to graduate school. The problem that's arisen is whether I want to go into that much debt for undergraduate work, knowing that graduate school will cost still more . . . . With every school you apply to for financial aid, you have to fill out a separate form. A lot of schools request that you take special tests, which costs money. And it's a constant hassle with your parents, every time you have to come to them."

In my classes I have a number of students who got their start in higher education because the low tuition, open door community college provided

a real option for them. One, now a master's degree candidate, wrote in a recent paper he handed in, "I thought I would not be able to further my education because I was married and working full time," but the community college "opened new opportunities for me and many of my fellow workers in the Honolulu Police Department." With a stiff tuition fee, he probably would never have attempted to return to college, but the low fees of the UH community colleges made the option a real one for Joe.

Another of my police-officer students wrote that the community college policy of open door admission and low tuition costs "offers a chance. A change for adult students to obtain cultural objectives and learn or sharpen vocational skills. A chance for the economically deprived to realize the worth of themselves. A chance for every person to succeed or fail by his own efforts. After all, that's what our country is all about. From its beginning the best America could offer was a chance."

I am fearful that raising tuition fees for our second chance institutions, the community colleges, will limit the chance that has always been part of the American dream. The chance that any person should have to make something of himself. The more realistic we can make that chance, the better we make America.

If I might be permitted to paraphrase Thaddeus Stevens' toast, I'd raise my glass: "To education at all levels, may America learn to dread loss of her ideals and of human potential more than she dreads taxation!"

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